

YOU ASKED

How Do Americans Use Public Libraries?



COURTESY OF CAROL BREY-CASIANO

Carol Brey-Casiano is currently an information resource officer with the U.S. Department of State. A past president of the American Library Association, the oldest and largest library association in the world, she has worked in public libraries for 30 years, serving as director of public libraries in El Paso, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Oak Park, Illinois.

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70 percent of Americans say that the public library improves the quality of life in their community

BY CAROL BREY-CASIANO

Public libraries are at the center of American life. Public libraries help students with homework, help entrepreneurs manage businesses, provide busy parents with access to parenting information, and offer senior citizens up-to-date health information. Some

70 percent of Americans say that the public library improves the quality of life in their community. And 96 percent of Americans believe that, because libraries provide free access to information and resources, they play an important role in giving everyone a chance to succeed.



WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

Public libraries have many resources for immigrants. Here desk assistant Mani Neupane helps Shahla Mostafavi and her son Parsa Fallahi, 7, as they check out books at Gaithersburg Library in Maryland. Mostafavi immigrated from Iran 10 years ago. She finds the library a useful place to learn English.



Public libraries in the United States were first established in the mid- to late 1800's, when increased interest in public education and the desire to share knowledge led to broad public support for free libraries. They were intended to provide a way for people to continue their education after they finished school, and for that reason, the public library is often called the “people’s university” — a place where everyone can learn, with free access to a wide variety of print and electronic resources.

Today, U.S. public libraries offer computers with free Internet access and other electronic resources. As more businesses and government agencies require applicants to apply for jobs online, many public libraries now help patrons complete online job applications, provide access to job databases, and offer software or other resources to help patrons create résumés. In fact, many U.S. public libraries provide the only free public access to computers and the Internet available in their communities. Wireless access is now offered at more than 80 percent of U.S. public libraries.

In a more traditional vein, public libraries offer a wide variety of books and other reading material — including sturdy “board books” for toddlers, illustrated picture books for children, novels for young adults and books and magazines for adults on almost every topic imaginable. To encourage reading and enhance literacy in their communities, public libraries sponsor programs for all ages — from story times for children, to reading programs for youths and popular lectures for



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adults. Many libraries sponsor Summer Reading programs that offer incentives to encourage patrons of all ages to read during the summer. They also sponsor cultural programs, such as author readings, art exhibits, book fairs and other events to draw people in. Public libraries also provide meeting rooms and auditoriums for use by local community groups, in addition to rooms for individual and group study.

Public libraries in the United States are supported by local taxes; they also receive some state and federal funds. These funds are supplemented by Friends of the Library groups and library foundations, and these nongovernmental sources of funding have become increasingly important in the current economic climate as local budgets tighten. According to a report by international library cooperative OCLC, 31 percent of Americans ages 14 and older say that the local public library has become more valuable to their community because of the downturn in the economy.

Elizabeth Darrah, left, of Anderson, South Carolina, watches her 3-year-old daughter Rebekah reach for a book as her youngest daughter, 14-month-old Sarah Beth, looks at a book in the Anderson County Library’s Scripps Howard Children’s Library. The family was attending a “story time” event to encourage children under the age of 6 to read.

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